

Project SOAR: 4-H Mentoring Program

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Program of Distinction Category

Leadership, Citizenship, and Life Skills Categories

- Leadership Development
- Caring Relationships, Community Spirit
- Diversity & Inclusive Environments

Healthy Lifestyles Categories

- Healthy Relationships, Good Decisions

Youth in Governance Categories

- Youth & Adult Partnerships
- Volunteer Development

Sources of funding that support this program:

USDA: CYFAR (Children, Youth, and Families at Risk)

City of Chandler/Valley of the Sun United Way

Arizona 4-H Youth Foundation

National 4-H Youth Foundation

4-H Club Foundation of Mississippi 4-H

Past Sources: Arizona Supreme Court, US Department of Justice, Office of Justice

Knowledge and Research Base

Youth who fall behind in school are often the ones who drop out, abuse drugs, are inclined to be involved in criminal activity, and who become teen parents. Researchers agree that enhancing academic success and preventing school failure leads to decreasing at-risk behaviors and contributes to strengthening youth, families, and communities (Dryfoss, 1990; Loyer-Carlson & Willits, 1993; Fashola, Slavin, Calderon & Duran, 1997). The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1995) states that healthy adolescent development should include: social support systems, adult mentoring, peer-mediated counseling and peer tutoring, and life skills development. One approach that is proving successful in improving school attendance, school performance, increasing protective factors, and decreasing risk factors is mentoring (Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 1995; Grossman, 1999; Sipe, 1995). A national impact study of Big Brothers Big Sisters (Tierney et al., 1995) found that mentored youth were less likely to start using drugs, less likely to hit someone, had improved school attendance and performance, and attitudes toward completing school work had improved as did peer and family relationships.

Needs Assessment

In a census of school dropouts, Arizona ranks 50th in the nation for the percentage of teens between the ages of 16 to 19 who withdraw from school (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004). According to the Children's Defense Fund, Arizona ranks 39th among states in the percent of children who are poor, ranks 50th among states in per pupil expenditures, has 77% of 4th graders reading below grade level, 14.8% of 16-19 year olds not enrolled in school and not high school graduates, and 24.6% of juveniles arrested. Students recommended to Project SOAR are academically at-risk of school failure. At-risk behaviors include chronic truancy, behavior problems, office referrals, and low grades.

A community needs assessment (Mesa United Way, 2003) identified providing mentoring services as a priority. Youth involved in Project SOAR experience the following risk factors: poverty, limited English proficiency, low test scores, violent neighborhoods, and limited resources. The majority of participants involved in Project SOAR are Hispanic.

Goals and Objectives

The Project SOAR 4-H Mentoring Program is an intensive after-school mentoring program targeting at risk youth and families. Project SOAR matches a selected mentee with a college student and provides educational and prevention activities to promote positive school experiences, skill building, academic success, and community involvement. The goals of Project SOAR are: 1) Provide a quality one-on-one mentoring experience for at risk students, 2) Increase academic achievement and attitudes toward school, 3) Improve attendance rates, 4) Increase life skills and 5) decrease at-risk behaviors.

Target Audience

Targeted youth selected to participate in Project SOAR are at risk of school failure due to below average reading scores, limited resources due to low socio-economic environment, poor school performance and attendance, and school referrals due to behavior and other risk factors. Project SOAR targets 5th and 6th grade students referred by teachers and counselors. Project SOAR has also been delivered to middle and high school students.

Program Design and Content

Type of Program

The Project SOAR program model is a one-on-one mentoring approach in a group setting. This model is an emerging model in the field of mentoring. The program design and methodology is based on mentoring research, the best practices identified by the National Mentoring Center, Office of Juvenile Justice, Public/ Private Ventures, and effective elements of mentoring established by the National Mentoring Partnership. Programs are targeted to 15-20 mentees and mentors for one school year.

Methods Used to deliver the program

Project SOAR components include:

- **Individual Mentoring:** Mentoring is offered four days per week in a supervised school setting. Youth participate in four hours of mentoring two days per week. One hour of homework assistance is followed by one hour of enrichment and skill building activities with a mentor.
- **Academic Support:** One hour of homework assistance.
- **Skill Building/ Prevention:** Mentees participate in weekly workshops that provide life skills and prevention education that target risky behaviors (poor attendance, violence, substance abuse, gangs, academic failure).
- **Leadership Development:** Monthly leadership training for mentees/mentors.
- **Community Service:** Participants plan and implement two community service activities.
- **Family Nights:** Two hour monthly educational sessions are given to strengthen family/school relationships. Mentors discuss mentee academic progress, attendance, and behavior.
- **Cultural/Educational/Social Activities:** A series of formal and informal opportunities for mentees and mentors to participate in new life enriching experiences. Provide activities to keep youth involved in positive youth development and decrease risky behaviors.
- **4-H After-school:** Enrichment opportunities offered on a weekly basis. (Arts & Crafts, Mini-Society, Photography, Health Rocks, Leadership RAP, Life Skills, Dare To Be You).
- **Mentor Selection:**
Screening – application process, interviews, background screening
Mentor Training- orientation, monthly training sessions and weekly follow-up,
Mentor Roles, Working with Adolescents, Communication, Tutoring,
Relationship Building, Leadership, and Goal Setting)
Mentee Match Inventory
Mentor Notes- weekly reflection on matches, goals, mentor/mentee issues
Mentor Commitment – 4 hours of mentoring per week (meet 2 hours twice a week), monthly training, weekly follow-up

Curricula/ educational materials

Mentor Training:

Mentoring Training Curriculum. (1991). National Mentoring Working Group, United Way of America.

Serrano, R. (1998). *Project SOAR Training Manual*. Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona College of Education.

Family Nights:

Molgarrrd, V., Kumpfer, K., Fleming, E. (1999). *Strengthening Families Program*. Ames, IA: Iowa State University, University Extension.

Program Organization & Design:

Serrano, R. (1997). *Project SOAR Mentoring Initiative: Student Opportunity for Academic Renewal*. Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona College of Education.

National Mentoring Center. (2005, June 6). *Strengthening Mentoring Programs*. Retrieved from <http://www.nwrel.org/mentoring/curriculum.html>

After-school Enrichment:

National 4-H Council 2005 Source Book. *4-H Youth Development Curricula*. Retrieved from <http://www.4-hmall.org> Chevy Chase, MD: National 4-H Council

Partnerships or collaborations

Galveston Elementary School, Chandler School District- program facilities
The University of Arizona Cooperative Extension/4-H Youth Development-
Program Delivery
Valley of the Sun United Way – Funding Support
City of Chandler – Funding Support
Chandler-Gilbert Community College- Mentors
The Arizona 4-H Youth Foundation – Funding Support

Program Evaluation

Process

Project SOAR evaluation design entails the convergence of several methodologies to assess outcome, process, and capacity. Outcomes are evaluated using: 1) student quarterly grades; 2) teacher and parent assessments of student behavior toward learning; 3) mentor/mentee/parent surveys; and 4) quarterly attendance records. Process evaluation entails the use of a participatory research strategy including focus groups with parents/mentors/students to determine program strategies and mentor notes to continually reform the development and enhancement of the program. Capacity evaluation includes interviews with key stakeholders such as project director, program coordinator, school personnel, and information from focus groups.

Outcomes and Impacts

Project SOAR has reached 270 youth. Program evaluation with 22 program participants, 15 mentors, and 20 parents resulted in the following outcomes and impacts:

Academic progress: Students showed statistically significant change ($p < .05$) in mathematics, reading, and in writing.

Behavior: Teacher assessments show a general trend of improvement in classroom behaviors over the course of the academic year. Statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) were found in use of time, completing of homework, and respect of others.

Student Assessment: Thirteen of 24 indicators of behavior, attitudes, study skills and inter-personal skills reflected a statistically significant increase from before to after reports.

Parent Assessment: Parents indicated a decrease in problem areas with their child with the exception of attitude, which was essentially not changed. The most significant changes were in behavior and problem solving skills. Parents also indicated that youth had shown an increase in school participation, experiencing new things, and improved grades.

Mentor Assessment: Mentors indicated an increase in 11 out of 12 personal skills indicators. Statistically significant changes at $p < .05$ level were found in the areas of time management, collaboration, presentation skills, and active listening.

Communication to stakeholders

Program successes and results have been reported to school and United Way officials via yearly reports and site visits. Program results have also been shared at various conferences including the National Association of Extension Family and Consumer Sciences annual conference, National Children Youth and Families at Risk (CYFAR) conferences, The Office of Justice, The Arizona Mentoring Group, and The University of Arizona College of Agriculture.

Program Sustainability

Project SOAR has been in existence since 1994. The Valley of the Sun United Way, City of Chandler, The University of Arizona and USDA CYFAR, and the Office of Justice provided funding in support of this project. United Way, The University of Arizona, and others contributing funds continue to support the program.

Replication

Project SOAR has been replicated successfully in after-school settings in elementary, middle, and high schools. The Department of Justice in conjunction with the 4-H Youth Development Program and Girl Scouts funded a three year program, Project JUMP, based on the Project SOAR model. A new model is being proposed using high school students as mentors.

Rationale and Importance of Program

Mentoring is a promising strategy for helping youth to develop emotional, social, and academic skills for future success. 4-H educators and other youth development professionals can use mentoring programs to reach youth who are at greatest risk. Project SOAR is an emerging group mentoring model with promise.

References

Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. (1995). *Great transitions: Preparing adolescents for a new century*. New York, NY: Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Dryfoos, J.G. (1990). *Adolescents at risk: Prevalence and practice*. New York, N.Y.: University Press.

Fashola, O., Slavin, R., Calderon, M., & Duran, R. (1997). *Effective programs for Latino students in elementary and middle schools*. Hispanic Dropout Project.

Grossman, J.B. (Eds). (1999). *Contemporary issues in mentoring*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.

Loyer-Carlson, V.L., & Willits, F. (1993). *Youth at risk: Research and practice*. University Park, PA: The Northeast Center for Rural Development.

Tierney, J.P., Grossman, J.B., & Resch, N.L. (1995). *Making a difference: An impact study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.

Sipe, C. (1995). *Mentoring: A synthesis of P/PV's research: 1988-1995*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.

United Way Needs Assessment. (2003). *Building blocks for the future: East valley needs assessment*. Mesa, AZ: Mesa United Way.